

Leadership for Learning: Assessing Behaviors That Matter Most

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This paper builds on ideas expressed in *Assessing Learning-Centered Leadership: Connections to Research, Professional Standards, and Current Practices* (www.vanderbilt.edu/lsi/laspape/rationale.pdf), a publication developed to provide the rationale for the Vanderbilt Assessment of Leadership in Education (VAL-Ed) project. The VAL-Ed project is an initiative to develop a national evaluation for school principals and school leadership teams.

Introduction

There is little disagreement about the importance of leadership for school improvement. In fact, there is rather widespread consensus regarding leadership practices that can initiate and sustain instructional improvement. Yet if there is knowledge about what school leaders need to do to improve schools, why is accomplishing that goal so difficult? Problems rest with recruiting and retaining qualified candidates in leadership positions. Those filling leadership positions often lack the knowledge and skills to be successful. Professional preparation and development often fall short, and the professional conditions and the demands of the job may be misaligned with the responsibilities.

Perhaps, most important, there is a lack of empirical evidence about whether and how principals and other building-level leaders can change their leadership practices and behaviors. Also, there is a lack of empirical evidence about whether and how interventions can improve leadership practices. Minimal attention has been paid to assessment, feedback, and subsequent action on performance as a strategy for improving leadership. Most of the current focus is on professional development, mentoring, and licensing policies, but with limited to no robust empirical research on the impact of these strategies. Leadership assessment and feedback are important missing links to improving and strengthening school leadership.

This paper presents a framework that describes learning-centered leadership—a set of behaviors rooted in the literature that are associated with effective leadership. It emphasizes the effective behaviors of school principals and other building-level leaders. Learning-centered leadership is leadership for student performance. In addition, learning-centered leadership behaviors can serve as a framework for leadership assessment. One of the greatest needs in the field is to develop leadership assessment that can be used to provide high-quality performance feedback to school leaders.

Learning-Centered Leadership

A comprehensive review of the research literature (see Goldring, Porter, Murphy, & Elliott, 2007; Murphy, Elliott, Goldring, & Porter, 2007) suggests that there are two key dimensions of highly effective leadership behavior: core components and key processes. *Core components* refers to *what* principals or leadership teams must accomplish to improve academic and social learning for all students. The core components consist of school characteristics that support the learning of students and enhance the ability of teachers to teach. *Key processes* refers to *how* leaders create those core components. The key processes are leadership behaviors that raise organizational members' levels of commitment and shape organizational culture. Effective learning-centered leadership is at the intersection of the two dimensions: core components created through key processes.

Core Components of Learning-Centered Leadership

Highly effective, learning-centered instructional leaders focus their behaviors on six core components: high standards for student learning, rigorous curriculum, quality instruction, a culture of learning and professional behavior, connections to external communities, and systemic performance accountability.

- **High Standards for Student Learning.** *Effective leaders ensure there are individual, team, and school goals for rigorous student academic and social learning.*

There is considerable evidence that a key function of effective school leadership concerns shaping the purpose of the school and articulating the school’s mission. Setting clear goals for student achievement is central to effective leadership to guide the daily practices and decisions of all stakeholders. Yet, it is not the mere presence of goals for student learning but specifically the quality of the school goals that is important—namely, the extent to which there are high standards and rigorous learning goals that “apply to *all*, or essentially all, students rather than a selected subset such as college-bound students seeking advanced placement” (Linn, 2000, p. 10). High standards for student performance focus on outputs rather than processes or inputs.

- **Rigorous Curriculum (Content).** *Effective leaders ensure the school implements rigorous curriculum content. Rigorous curriculum is defined as ambitious academic content provided to all students in core academic subjects.*

High standards must be translated into ambitious academic content represented in the curriculum that students experience. Effective leaders are knowledgeable about and deeply involved in the school’s curricular program. These leaders work with colleagues to ensure that the school is defined by a rigorous curriculum program and that each student’s program is of high quality. They also are attentive to establishing adequate opportunities for all students to experience a rigorous curriculum regardless of a student’s race, sex, socioeconomic background, first language, or disability. Effective instructional leaders work with their teachers to ensure that the content of instruction is rigorous and aligned to the school’s high standards for student learning.

- **Quality Instruction (Pedagogy).** *Effective leaders ensure there is quality instruction throughout the school. Quality instruction is defined as effective instructional practices that maximize student academic and social learning.*

Teachers must deliver a rigorous curriculum in ways that actively engage students. Effective teachers are clear about their instructional goals, communicate to their students what is expected of them and why, make expert use of existing instructional materials, are knowledgeable about their students, adapt instruction to their students’ needs, and anticipate misconceptions in students’ existing knowledge. They monitor students’ understandings by offering regular appropriate feedback, and they accept appropriate responsibility for student outcomes. Effective instructional leaders find ways to ensure that quality instruction is experienced by all students in their school; they spend time on

the instructional program, through providing feedback to teachers and supporting teachers to improve their instruction.

- **Culture of Learning and Professional Behavior.** *Effective leaders ensure there are integrated communities of professional practice in the service of student academic and social learning. There is a healthy school environment in which student learning is the central focus.*

Schools organized as communities (rather than as bureaucracies) are more likely to exhibit academic success. Effective professional communities are deeply rooted in the academic and social learning goals of the schools. Often termed *teacher professional communities*, these collaborative cultures are defined by elements such as shared goals and values, focus on student learning, shared work, deprivatized practice, and reflective dialogue. School leadership plays a central role in the extent to which a school exhibits a climate of learning and professional behavior and whether there are integrated professional communities; schools with supportive principals tend to have higher levels of professional community. Leaders play a central role in promoting a climate of respect and support for students and teachers.

- **Connections to External Communities.** *Leading a school with high expectations and academic achievement for all students requires robust connections to the external community. Effective leaders ensure linkages to families as well as other people and institutions in the community that advance academic and social learning.*

A substantial research base has reported positive relationships between family involvement and social and academic benefits for students. Schools with well-defined parent partnership programs show achievement gains over schools with less robust partnerships. Communitywide involvement—such as school-linked social services, parent education programs, and community organizing initiatives—aim to change the underlying conditions associated with low student achievement. Effective leaders model the importance of collaborating with parents and others in the extended school community. External collaboration is part of the strategic vision of the school linked to the academic and social learning goals. Effective leadership also ensures that expectations, information, and interests from the community are part of the school’s goals, culture, and decisions.

- **Systemic Performance Accountability.** *Effective leaders ensure there is individual and collective responsibility among leadership, faculty, and students for achieving the rigorous student academic and social learning goals.*

Accountability stems from both external and internal systems. School leaders integrate internal and external accountability systems by holding their staff accountable for implementing strategies that align teaching and learning with achievement goals. They focus their staff and students on the performance standards and school goals through meetings, performance reviews, classroom observations, discussions of curriculum and instructional strategies, and other interactions with staff. Effective leaders enhance

accountability by offering individualized support to staff, challenging teachers to think critically about their teaching, and promoting an atmosphere of collaboration in the school. Assessment systems are central to systemic performance accountability. These systems are comprehensive and use a wide variety of monitoring and data collection strategies, both formal and informal. They include multiple and complementary indicators of student learning. They involve triangulation of data from multiple sources in order to arrive at judgments about the effectiveness of curricular and instructional programs and organizational operations.

Key Processes of Learning-Centered Leadership

Key leadership processes refers to the ways or actions in which leadership—individually and collectively—influences organizations and their constituencies to move toward achieving the core components. In the learning-centered leadership framework, effective leadership rests on six key processes: planning, implementing, supporting, advocating, communicating, and monitoring. As depicted in a systems view of organizations, these processes are interconnected and recursive as well as highly reactive to one another. For example, to *monitor* teaching for high-quality instruction and *advocate* for all students, leaders first need to *plan* for the collection of key data, *communicate* both the need for the data and the results, *implement* changes based on the information gleaned from the monitoring, and *support* teachers to help them improve their instruction.

- **Planning.** *Planning is articulating shared direction and coherent policies, practices, and procedures for realizing high standards of student learning.*

Planning helps leadership focus resources, tasks, and people. Effective principals are highly skilled and proactive planners. Planning is needed in each of the six core components; it is an engine of school improvement that builds common purpose and a shared culture. For example, to ensure high-quality instruction (one of the core components in the learning-centered leadership framework), learning-centered leaders devote considerable time and undertake careful planning to guarantee that the school employs excellent teachers who are highly qualified teachers and whose values and instructional frameworks are consistent with the mission and the culture of the school. Effective leaders assume an active role in planning the overall professional development system of the school. They also actively plan for the collection of data needed to both implement systemic accountability and to monitor the curriculum and instructional quality.

- **Implementing.** *Leaders implement; they put into practice the activities necessary to realize high standards for student learning.*

Learning-centered leaders are directly involved in implementing policies and practices that further the core components in their schools in pursuit of school goals. For example, effective leaders implement joint planning time for teachers and other structures as mechanisms to develop a culture of learning and professional behavior. Similarly, they implement programs that build productive parent and community relations as a way to

achieve connections to external communities. School leadership engages with school staff to implement rigorous curriculum that is aligned with high standards for student performance. They implement high-quality instructional programs, and they are personally involved with school faculty to implement assessment systems at the classroom and school levels for systemic accountability.

- **Supporting.** *Leaders create enabling conditions; they secure and use the financial, political, technological, and human resources necessary to promote academic and social learning.*

Supporting is closely related to the idea of transformational leadership behaviors associated with helping people be successful. Learning-centered leaders devote considerable time to supporting teachers in their efforts to strengthen the quality of instruction. Support also is a key process in ensuring a culture of learning and professional behavior. Leaders support integrated communities of practice by providing the infrastructure and resources (such as time, materials, and space) that nurture informal learning throughout the school. Shared decision making and other participatory mechanisms and structures provide a framework of support for cultures of learning and professional behavior. Leaders garner and allocate resources to bring communities of professional practice to life.

- **Advocating.** *Leaders promote the diverse needs of students within and beyond the school.*

Advocating for the best interests and needs of all children is a key process of learning-centered leadership. Learning-centered leaders advocate for a rigorous curriculum for all students. They ensure that policies in the school do not prevent or create barriers for certain students to participate in classes (such as algebra) that are deemed gateways to further learning. They ensure that special-needs students receive content-rich instruction. Through advocacy, learning-centered leaders work with teachers and other professional staff to ensure that the school's culture both models and supports respect for diversity. Further, advocacy is central to the systematic accountability processes in the school, as teachers are held accountable for the academic and social learning of the diverse student body. Leaders guide service providers, youth development specialists, and private organizations to create opportunities to serve children with multiple and varying needs. Learning-centered leaders advocate publicly on behalf of parents and their students to the political community and the educational bureaucracy.

- **Communicating.** *Leaders develop, use, and maintain systems of exchange among members of the school and with its external communities.*

Learning-centered leaders communicate strongly to all the stakeholders and constituencies both in and outside the school about the high standards for student learning. Through ongoing communication, schools and the community serve as resources for one another that inform, promote, and link key institutions in support of student academic and social learning. Learning-centered leaders hold faculty and students

accountable by communicating the results of accountability data regularly to students and parents in an accessible form, at multiple times, across an array of forums, and in multiple formats. Integrated communities of practice cannot emerge nor can they function if there is not open and adequate communication among teachers; between teachers and leaders; and among teachers, leaders, and students. Leadership must support and participate in these important conversations.

- **Monitoring.** *Monitoring refers to systematically collecting and analyzing data to make judgments that guide decisions and actions for continuous improvement.*

Learning-centered leaders monitor the school's curriculum, ensuring alignment between rigorous academic standards and curriculum coverage. They monitor students' programs of study to ensure that all students have adequate opportunity to learn rigorous content in all academic subjects. Effective leaders also actively monitor the procedures put into place to improve quality instruction. Monitoring student achievement is central to maintaining systemic performance accountability. Effective leaders are knowledgeable about assessment practices and are personally involved with faculty in monitoring assessment systems at the classroom and school levels. They help teachers use data to do the following: identify individual students who need remedial assistance, tailor instruction to individual students' needs, identify and correct gaps in the curriculum, improve or increase the involvement of parents in student learning, and assign or reassign students to classes or groups. Furthermore, effective leaders create conditions for teachers to share and discuss data; they use data to help teachers identify areas where they need to strengthen content knowledge or teaching skills to focus professional development.

The Need for Leadership Assessment

The framework for leadership assessment indicates that school leadership assessment should include measures of the intersection of the core components—*what* principals or leadership teams must accomplish to improve academic and social learning for all students—and the key processes—*how* they create those core components. Thus, the theory of action underlying the assessment framework is that effective leadership requires core components created through key processes.

To understand and measure leadership, it is not enough to assess the extent to which school leadership—the principal or teams of leaders—ensures that there is a culture of learning and professional behavior in the school. In assessing the school leader, it is also important to evaluate the leadership processes involved in establishing and nurturing a culture of learning and professional behavior. In other words, how is the leadership enacted around each core component? Does the leadership in the school support teachers to develop a culture of learning and professional behavior? Does the leadership implement programs to ensure there is a culture of learning and professional behavior? Does the leadership communicate effectively about the culture of learning? Thus, the conceptual framework calls for the assessment of leadership at the intersection of two dimensions: what leaders create and how they create it.

Leadership assessment should be part of the systems implemented to ensure high-quality leadership in all schools. The development of effective leadership has been significantly hampered by the paucity of robust frameworks and technically sound tools for assessing and monitoring leadership behaviors. Effective leadership assessment can be an integral part of a standards-based accountability system.

When designed accurately, done in a proactive manner, and properly implemented, leadership assessment has the power to improve organizational performance. First, leadership assessment can set the organizational goals and objectives for the school leader: “You get what you measure.” In other words, leadership assessment can help focus school leaders on those behaviors that are associated with student learning. Second, leadership assessment can provide both summative and formative feedback to school leaders. Incumbent school principals can benefit from assessment results as benchmarks for development and improvement; school leaders can identify gaps between existing leadership and desired outcomes and then make informed personnel decisions. Third, leadership assessment can serve as a powerful communication tool. Leadership assessment with well-articulated results can help support an environment of collective accountability.

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